LATE S. M. ALI **DHAKA FRIDAY DECEMBER 21, 2001**

Another wake-up call for earthquake preparedness

Take the agenda onboard at once or risk peril

"HURSDAY'S tremor measuring 3.82 on the Richter scale has been the lowest-intensity earthquake to hit the country since May 8, 1997. On that date it was 5.6 on the Richter scale. Then two earthquakes followed in a quick succession, one in a little over six months' time in November, 1997 and another one with a gap of one year and a half in-between, on July 22, 1999. They were 6 and 5.1 on the Richter scale respectively. As if to sharpen our awareness of what might happen if the latest tremor were of a higher intensity even this mild tremor at 3.82 on the scale sent the railings of the staircase in the century-old central jail building in Dhaka crumbling down with the ensuing stampede inflicting injuries on a hundred inmates.

In the eye of seismologists the chronology of geological trends in this region speaks of a catastrophic earthquake occurring every hundred years. The Assam earthquake that wreaked havoc on north-eastern Bangladesh and touched the fringes of Dhaka city took place in 1897. More than 100 years on, enough geological churning might have been there deeper down the earth's crust for a major earthquake to explode. Furthermore, the frequency at which smaller tremors are shaking the ground under our feet is also regarded as an omen for bigger earthquakes.

Bangladesh is on a techtonic line that remains highly vulnerable to earthquakes and if one of these happens to have a magnitude of seven on the Richter, the devastation in this populous country is certain to be at a cataclysmic level. Given the whole range of infrastructure, physical assets, buildings, bridges, culverts and fleets of transports we have acquired over time, just imagine the sheer magnitude of loss we would sustain in the event that a big earthquake visits us. As a counter-vailing factor, whose recital basically betrays a complacence that has been the hall-mark of our approach to tremor susceptibilities, it is sometimes stated that we are sitting on alluvial soil which should help absorb the earthquake shocks. The truth is our continual suction of sub-soil water through the deep tubewells. especially in the Dhaka metropolis, is itself precipitating land subsidence, not to speak of the subterranean slides a severe earthquake could very well bring on. We have not even measured the hollowing of the subterranean, an issue that cannot be trifled with in view of our earthquake vulnerabilities.

We have serious structural deficiencies insofar as our preparedness against earthquakes goes. If our preparedness on a scale of ten to meet the challenge of floods and cyclone is put at three and four respectively then our readiness against earthguake must be counted at a minus zero level. We need at least three seismic observatories but have only one at Chittagong and that too obsolete for all practical purposes. We don't have the equipment to pinpoint the epicentre of an earthquake and with such missing knowledge of its origin we are basically sitting on a ticking time bomb not knowing from which direction it will explode. We have money for everything on the earth but not for the three observatories we have all along needed, albeit with its complement of some modern equipment and gadgets. Let the new government find the money required to adequately revamp our earthquake preparedness status which has been a low priority concern with successive governments. They must get a move on to acquire a state of the art technology in this

Another critical area of our vulnerability to earthquakeinduced disasters has had to do with serious construction faults built into 80 per cent of our structures in the metropolis. The builders could easily flout the building codes, because once the designs are approved there is nobody to monitor the implementation of the building plans. The private home owners, the real estate agents and the LGED engineers are responsible for lapses on this count in variable degrees.

What are we going to do with the flawed existent structures' Do they admit of renovation to reduce the risk of collapse? Experts think many of these could be reinforced with concrete pillars or by putting iron rods between the brick layers. We need a law with some teeth to make the building owners do it on pain of punitive action.

As for any new construction work, the archaic building code itself evidently needs updating. All house builders will have to give a written commitment to RAJUK that their failure to abide by the updated building code would make them liable for legal action. Appropriate inspection and prosecution mechanisms should be put in place for the sake of playing a comprehensive watchdog role over the construction sector.

Our bottom-line suggestion would be this: let a national committee be formed by the government comprising experts and stakeholders to draw up a suitable preparedness strategy against the dangers of earthquake.

Another Dhaka



HASNAT ABDUL HYE

T has become familiar to see Dhaka wearing a new look during festivities of more than a few days at a stretch. More than illumination, cheerful sounds and pell mell buying spree on the eve of festival it is what happens to the city during the holidays that is worth noticing. As soon as the frenetic activities preceding the start of the happy days are over a sudden and complete transformation takes hold over the restless metropolis. A kind of languor and laid back air come to permeate the tired landmarks and worn out facets of the city. Compared to the usual hubbub and maddening rush the near somnolence of the city during the festive days appears almost surreal. It is as if a magic wand moves over the megacity bringing another of its

ncarnation alive. The first thing that strikes the eyes during a long festival is the thinning of population. The city is suddenly relieved of the burden of teeming millions. People no longer crowd every conceivable place and the city does not appear like a vast sea of human bodies jostling for space. Shops and markets remain closed. The few that are kept open shower courtesy and attention on the motley customers. The footpath are empty of ubiquitous hawkers and their sprawling merchandise. stark contrast to the normal that it

flood water footpaths hidden from sight appear tantalizingly inviting pedestrians. People sauntering along can be seen in their full outline and not as part of an amorphous human wave.

Next to the sudden fall in the number of people is the slimming of the burgeoning traffic on the roads that accompanies the holiday season much to the relief of Dhakaites. As the tidal wave of rickshaws surging from all direc-

never fails to be captivatingly pleasant. For those who remain in Dhaka during a festival the changed outlook and atmosphere are no less exhilarating than the holiday spirit.

Dhaka during a festival now-adays may look like another city because it is so different. But it is not entirely a stranger or new. For a few fleeting days the change shows how the city looked like in the not too distant past. The remembrance of those days brings back a feeling of nostalgia for the glory and happi-

city stretched to the limits. It is also bursting at the seams under the weight of burgeoning population. In addition to natural growth, every year there is a growing flow of people from outside, particularly villages. They come in drove more by the push factor than by the pulling force of the megacity. The migrants crowd in slums that sprout and grow in the interstices of the city and spill over into footpaths. For livelihood they join the ranks of thousands of rickshaw pullers, hawkers and

move. Since the ideal is seldom practical, along with those attracted by pull factors some migrants not belonging to this category may also be expected to trickle in. The success of the strategy of decentralized migration should be judged as reasonably successful if it can ensure focusing on the core problem of Dhaka i.e. its exponentially growing population. A durable solution to most of the civic problems of Dhaka will have been found if the demographic explosion is

other hand, rickshaws encourage migration from rural areas because of their easy availability. In this vicious circle the crucial link is clearly the pressure of population. Similarly, other vicious circles afflicting Dhaka's civic life can also be traced to demographic pressure. In view of the overriding impor-

tance of the role of population in the aggravation of urban situation in Dhaka it is surprising that so little attention has so far been paid to the issue. It is not being suggested that problems like traffic congestion, air pollution, water supply, waste disposal, physical infrastructures need not be addressed directly. What is being stressed is a holistic plan incorporating the cause and the symptoms and addressing them with equal urgency. Of course, because of the inherent nature of the inter-linked problems measures addressing them will have different time frames. It is important to recognise this and integrate them temporally and physically. The short term measures should be part of the medium-term plan which in turn should be based on the long term

During festivals with long holidays Dhaka looks pleasantly different because many people leave the city for a few days. If this transformation can be captured even gradually and within limits through development of the hinterland by the government and promotion of market forces Dhaka may come to have a different look than the present dismal one. That vision may become a reality if a fresh start is made with people at the centre. Near obsession with the present and pre-occupation with crisis management may not allow that vision to prevail.

Hasnat Abdul Hye is a former secretary, novelist

IN MÝVIEW

During festivals with long holidays Dhaka looks pleasantly different because many people leave the city for a few days. If this transformation can be captured even gradually and within limits through development of the hinterland by the government and promotion of market forces Dhaka may come to have a different look than the present dismal one. That vision may become a reality if a fresh start is made with people at the centre. Near obsession with the present and pre-occupation with crisis management may not allow that vision to prevail.

tions dwindle to a trickle the roads become visible with their impressive width and straight alignment. Cars that usually crawl and cower in the congested traffic, hemmed in by menacing rickshaws on all sides, now glide along as if moved by a gentle breeze. Nearly free from the clanging thicket of rickety rickshaws the hapless roads get a liberating respite and wallow with some abandon. Even the notorious autorickshaws with two-stroke engine belching smoke and toxic fume make themselves scarce during the few days of a festival. Along with life threatening smoke and insalubrious dust deafening noise also takes temporary leave creating an atmosphere of relative calm. Taking everything together the sights and sounds that remain in Dhaka during festival holidays are in such

ness of the past. The peace and tranquility of old Dhaka may not be resurrected in full but cannot some aspects of that past be retrieved? The absence of the maddening crowd and the pause in the frenzy of activities encourage one to indulge in thoughts of fancy and fond hope. From a city gasping for breath nealect and mindless through excesses can Dhaka be redeemed to become a reasonably livable place? It need not hark back to the past but can't some glimpses of the

The litany of the woes of Dhaka is long. This along with the common sense and scholarly explanations of the malaise have now become all too familiar. But one should not beat about the bush for grandiloquence and instead face the stark reality. The cause of Dhaka's present plight lies with its people. It has become a

capacity of the city to support and sustain the urban population. Increase in the number of rickshaws or over crowding of slums and footpaths are the symptoms; the malaise lies in the endless flow of people from outside Dhaka. Any plan to tackle the overall problem of the capital city must deal directly with the problem of migration. Whatever solution is thought of and pressed into action in the short term it must have a major role for the provision of livelihood to the unemploved outside Dhaka. Rural-urban migration is ineluctable with or without development. The strategy should be to catch hold of some of the migrants at the Upazila and others at the Zila level. Ideally only those who are eligible to migrate to Dhaka by the pull factor should

domestic helps. It is people like

these new migrants who strain the

achieved by administrative fiat. Even China with its ironclad laws has failed to stem the tide of ruralurban migration. Development of the hinterland and promotion of market forces regulating demand and supply of labour can turn out to be enduring and practical solutions.

contained and controlled in a time-

bound programme. This cannot be

It is not difficult to identify that most of the problems of daily nature in Dhaka originate from demographic pressure. If the problem of traffic congestion is taken into consideration it will be seen to be the result of new comers entering the informal labour market as a regular flow every month. Demand for rickshaws in Dhaka bears little relation to supply. Moreover, oversupply of rickshaws, in addition to clogging roads, has made plying of taxis with meter unprofitable. On the

Few rich men and many poor people



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

HIS is an age-old question, but I would like to ask it again. Why are there so few rich folks in the world and many poor people? It may be a silly question to ask, but tell me if you know the answer. The race of men has scoured the world, unraveling the mysteries between heaven and earth. But have they unraveled the mystery of their own fate? Why are some showered with plenty while others struggle with privation?

In other words, how do we explain the contrast at traffic lights when cars are swamped by carcass of panhandlers, the symbol of motion clashing with the gambol of extinction? How do we compare sybarites with scavengers, those who pick the best things of life and those who cannot even find its basics? How do we compare satisfaction to starvation, the squirt of delight that comes with consumption to the stabs of pain when hunger burns in stomach?

So, how do we compare the poor to the rich? The standards perhaps vary with time and place from the sublime to the ridicule. According to

Henry IV, the 16th-century king of France, poverty is when a peasant cannot have a chicken in his pot every Sunday. In Othello, Shakespeare writes that one who steals the purse steals nothing. But a man is indeed poor when one has robbed his good name. English novelist Jane Austin wrote that single women had dreadful propensity for being poor. French novelist Anatole France ridiculed that the poor have to labour in the face of the majestic

equality of law, which forbids the rich

explained that this theft occurred because a few men misappropriated the surplus value of many men's labour. That was how man exploited man, he preached. One day the world was going to belong to the working class once that surplus was eliminated. From each according to his means to each according to his need would be the ideal solution, he concluded.

Is the difference between rich and poor just a matter of equilibrium level? Would it diminish only if the

possible to make the ends meet. Thomas Jefferson, the 3rd President of the USA, characterized certain debauchery with the way rich treated the poor. "Experience declares that man is the only animal which devours its own kind" he said, for I can apply no milder term tothe general prey of the rich on the

The question is whether the poor are devoured by design of fate, or by contrivance of the rich. Religion preempts that question with a proamendments were made to these laws based on a harsher philosophy that regarded pauperism among able-bodied workers as a mora

Which is often deemed to be the case in the discourse between indigence and affluence. Is it a moral failing of the poor that they live in hunger and hardship? Is it a conscious choice to accept a life of sorrow and squalor? Are people poor because they are indolent and lack in ambition, because they wolves are barely kept from the doors. More than anything, solvency is a dynamics of life where the ration of luck and passion of talent keep a man on the cutting edge of his destiny. For 2.8 billion people of the world, who live under \$2 per day that edge is very thin.

So far that has tackled the science of poverty, but what about its art? Peter Ustinov, the Russianborn actor, director and writer, said that it was less nerve-racking to be poor than to be a rich man without money. The opposite is equally daunting if one is poor with all one's money. Howard Hughes, the superrich former owner of Trans World Airlines, spent the last days of his life hopping from one country to another, never shaving his beard, or clipping his nails, and pissing from a reclining chair at a specified angle to avoid the excruciating pain in his

urinary tract. Do you have an answer by now? Why are few men rich and so many poor? The easy answer is that there is not enough money in the world for all. But the difficult answer is very intriguing indeed. In the words of English poet Sir Edward Dyer, Some have too much, yet still do crave;/I little have, and seek no more./ They are but poor, though much they have,/And I am rich with

little store." From each according to his

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker

CROSS TALK

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bridges, to beg in the streets and to steal bread.

How does then the luxury of rich compare with the misery of poor? How could some men squander in moments what the vast majority dies to save in a lifetime? How does the life of a poor man compare with that of a rich man, the breathing organism inside one with the breathing organism inside another? How does the chemistry of flesh and blood create separate destinies in separate men?

French philosopher Proudhon had an idea of how it happened. Property is theft, he observed. Karl Marx, the prophet of the proletariats,

diverted to meet the needs of the unfortunate? Alexandre Kojè ve said that mainly two forces propelled history: the realm of necessity and the realm of freedom. In the realm of necessity, men fight amongst themselves for recognition and fight against Nature by work. In the other realm men mutually recognize one another without reservation, no longer fight and work as little as possible

Is poverty a lost fight within the fight between these two realms? The poor are losers in the realm of necessity, who are also the underdogs in the realm of freedom, and they end up working as much as through the eye of a needle before a rich man enters the heaven, which basically confirms Proudhon's hypothesis. In so much as poverty is destiny, it is also a devious device of the rich. The poor deserve poverty so much as they are also its victims.

Various societies have recognized this truth from time to time. John F. Kennedy cautioned in his inaugural address. "If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich." In the Elizabethan England in the 16th century the Poor Laws were codified to provide relief to the aged, sick, and infant poor, as well as work for the able-bodied. In 1834, the rich instead of earning their own Or is it their fate to suffer from

dearth of adequate means to support their lives? Do they lack in faculties and fortune, which mend the way for those who grow rich and successful? Is poverty a phenomenon of fate rather than a creation of one's failure to make the right choice? Are people born poor or do they become so as a result of their

Let us say, poor and rich are two extremes of a journey called solvency. Some are undersolvent, some are oversolvent, and others are just about the mark where the

ing of the wear and tear, etc. just

A fair proposition would be to levy

30 per cent of the value of the goods

with an additional levy of flat 10 per

cent volumetrically if the quantity is

look at the conditions of our roads.

means to each according to his need is not going to happen until man knows how to moderate his cravings. Take that out of men. you will have many rich folks in the world and only very few poor people.

Back to the future



writes from Karachi

AKISTAN has lived for more than two decades under the threat of a religious Sword of Damocles. After the Talibs took over in Afghanistan in 1996 our "future" began to take name and shape, the Talibanisation of Pakistan. A very vocal, religious minority in Pakistan held a rather submissive and terri fied liberal majority in virtual thrall, threatening to convert our present back to the past and to make our future bleak. While religious teaching is more than necessary it can never be a complete education by itself. Given the technological advances, theology is hopelessly mired in the past. Instead of investing in more schools and colleges, we allowed Madrassahs to move into this vacuum, proportionately increasing ignorance among our schoolgoing children

An absence of basic world knowledge among our youth virtually asked to be exploited by the reliber/October this year had the streets brimming over with sympathy for the Taliban. The youth yelled their throats hoarse and lungs out in support of "their" heroes Osama Bin Laden and Mullah Umar, a frenzied thousand or so crossing over into Afghanistan to join the ranks already fighting with the Taliban. Moulvi Sufi Mohammad of the Tehrik Shahriah Nifaz Muhammadi (TSNM) flamboyantly led them across the border on prime time TV. First in he was first out, abandoning them on the "every man for himself" basis and making it safely back across. Sales of Osama Bin Laden -shirts nose-dived when Osama took off on the age-old principle, discretion is the better part of valour Heroes are supposed to fight and die fighting, not to slink from hole to hole in the night like common thieves. One is grieved about the loss of civilian lives in Afghanistan and force-multiplying of the miseries of the Afghan people at the hands of both nature and man, for Pakistan the war has been a blessing in

giously motivated. The religious

rioting in Pakistan in Septem-

It started with President Bush doing the "Godfather" act, making an offer that the Pakistani President could not refuse. The logic of acceptance is infructuous, what mattered was a quick response, dragging off the feet being taken as good as a negative answer. The speed ensured that Pakistan did not, for once, end up on the wrong side of the divide. Even though we took an economic hit of massive export cancellations as well as an increasing burden of refugees, the economy is on the mend, at least in one area, a hefty increase in foreign reserves because of aid flows and home remittances. Debt relief also looks promising, that would be the icing on the cake.

Most important, the "Hundi" system that kills official home remittances is on the hit list of the western powers, not quite dead as yet but Qanooni. Interior Minister of the Northern Alliance, someone unheard of till three months ago, became the Interior Minister designate for the new Interim Government. No sooner was the UNsponsored Afghanistan Reunification Talks in Bonn over he flew off to well-publicized New Delhi visit to consult with the Indian government and iointly "condemn" Pakistani interference in Afghanistan. Not to starters, instead of "Interfering in Afghanistan" by being a food granary for Afghanistan and providing their refugees safe haven, we must start interfering in our own affairs. With the religious extremists are on the run we must take steps to ensure they never ever reach a position to hold this nation to hostage again.

Why should religious groupings be allowed to function as political tions propagating their own interpre-

tation of Islamic ideology. Jamaat-i-Islami (JI), Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam (JUI), Jamiat Ullemai-Pakistan (JUP), etc must become part of mainline parties. Presently, they have no hope of ever winning an electoral majority but they have the capacity to hold the majority to ransom by simply using their vocal militancy. This nuisance value must be eradicated, just ban religious

higher than the value e.g. commodities as compared to electronics.

Simultaneously, we should bring down our own import duties on electronic goods to 20 per cent across the board to make the smuggling because of "Afghan Transit rade" economically not feasible. Take this decision now, Mr President, it is long overdue. As a protection, to our own industry, there should be no import duties/sales taxes on electronic parts and spares. Moreover, no Afghan trucks should be permitted to enter Paki-

Only Pakistani trucking companies having clear proof of Pakistani ownership credentials should be permitted to ply into Afghanistan to deliver goods and supplies, or they can be taken by Afghan trucks from our borders. The US can enforce the peace as well as it has prosecuted the war, through judicious sampling of its airpower. The refugee camps should be moved from Pakistan soil across the border into adjacent areas of Afghanistan. We should take Mr Qanooni's words about his deep friendship with India and allow safe passage to Afghan refugees to refugee camps in Indian territory in Indian Punjab and Rajasthan. We should send each and every Afghan out, Pakistan ID Cards notwithstanding, first to refugee camps in Afghanistan and India, and from there to Afghanistan or settle in Indian cities like Mr Qanooni's parents have done in New Delhi. The using of our socio-economic facilities like electricity, gas, fuel, medical facilities, etc, makes Afghanistan (and the friends of Afghanistan's narrow-based minority government) liable to reimburse Pakistan according to a fixed formula for every person who sought refuge.

The great lessons of present experience is that Pakistan has no business in Afghanistan and viceversa. Afghans must use the norms that dictate international statute of passport and visa to come to Pakistan. The Qanoonis of Afghanistan do not need us, otherwise how can, the Interior Minister designate preempt foreign policy of that regime when the new Afghan government has yet to take office on Dec 22, 2001? The only way to rid ourselves of the sorry legacy of the past is to have no truck with Afghanistan.

Pakistan must look to the future and thank Divine Providence that despite our naivete and gullibility for all causes Muslim, Pervez Musharraf's pragmatic worldoriented policies has avoided the quagmire in Afghanistan's future. For Pakistan, it is back to the future, provided our present leadership shows the same amount of guts that it has shown for the last three

Ikram Sehgal, a former Major of Pakistan Army, is

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remaining alive only with difficulty. Pakistan owes a debt of gratitude to the blood spilled by the poor souls motivated by our religious leaders to join the Taliban. By butchering Pakistanis in cold blood and then gleefully desecrating their bodies on prime time TV, a thing unheard of in Islam, our people should be disabused, even though we are a glutton for punishment, about how grateful the Afghans were for the generosity Pakistan has extended to them for over two decades in material and moral aid. Late Ahmed

Shah Masood's Tajik protege Mr

be outdone Abdullah Abdullah followed him and "Gen" Fahim confirming that India has not interfered in Afghanistan by being the godfather of the Northern Alliance. For good measure, India's unquided missile, resurrected Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes said that India does have a border with Afghanistan but that Pakistan is presently simply occupying it.

The logic that Fernandes and Qanooni espouse is not made in an out of the ordinary mental asylum. Pakistan should wake up and listen to what Mr Qanooni has to say. For parties? It is the right of every citizen to be able to choose democratic platform, so why should we allow platforms that discriminate against the ordinary citizens simply because of his or her personal religious beliefs? The country has only one ideology, why allow it's base to be narrowed down further? Those of a particular belief must have as a broad-base the ideology of Pakistan. As an Islamic country that gives equal opportunity to other religions we cannot afford myriad religious factions in our own. It is un-Islamic to give recognition to fac-

parties, Mr President. Moreover, all mosques must be run by the government, whether District, Provincial or Federal is unimportant, the mosque pulpits must not be used to propagate a narrow parochial ideology. Goods and commodities going to Afghanistan or passing from Afghanistan to other countries use Pakistani ports, Pakistani socioeconomic infra-structure including roads, highways, railways, fuel, etc, taking away badly needed communications potential from our own population. A "service charge" must cater for the use thereof, the build-

a political analyst and columnist